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ABSTRACT

Interviews with ten reporters and editors for community newspapers, all winners of Pulitzer Prizes for articles that dealt with nonelite groups, formed the basis for the information presented in this paper. Among the topics discussed are problems caused by the close proximity of the community press to its readers; the economic and physical perils faced by Southern journalists who have taken unpopular racial positions during times of civil rights strife; problems faced by community press reporters due to insufficient resources for adequately covering the news; social and economic pressure on the community press to uphold the status quo, and the consequent tendency of the community press to refrain from reporting on controversial subjects--such as the social conditions of nonelite groups--until such time as they result in a confrontation situation; and the potential power of the community newspaper in reducing violence and curbing tensions when conflicts do occur. It is concluded that the community press only occasionally speaks up courageously in coverage of nonelite groups. (GT)

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THE COMMUNITY PRESS: OCCASIONAL VOICES OF COURAGE

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The Community Press: Occasional Voices of Courage

How does the community press cover non-elite groups?[1] To answer this question we have used material gained from lengthy personal interviews with ten reporters and editors awarded Pulitzer prizes for their work on community papers (those with circulations of less than 35,000).[2] This group of eight men and two women received Pulitzer prizes over a period from 1953 to 1976. All ten were honored for articles that dealt in some way with non-elite groups.

A break-down of the winners by name, publication, circulation of publication (as of 1977), year, and category of award: Buford Boone, Tuscaloose (Ala.) News, 28,201, 1957, editorial writing; Caro Brown, Alice (Tex.) Daily Echo, estimated less than 6,000, 1955, reporting; W. Horace Carter, Tabor City (N.C.) Tribune, 2,900, 1953, public service; Robert V. Cox, Chambersburg (Pa.) Public Opinion, 19,427, 1967, reporting; Horace G. Davis, Jr., Gainesville (Fla.) Sun, 32,311, 1971, editorial writing; John R. Harrison, Gainesville (Fla.) Sun, 1965, editorial writing; Ira B. Harkey, Jr., Pascagoula (Miss.) Chronicle, (paper no longer in existence), 1963, editorial writing; Hazel Brandon Smith, Lexington (Miss.) Advertiser, estimated less than 10,000 combined with other weeklies, 1964, editorial writing; John Strohmeyer, Bethlehem (Pa.) Globe-Times, 34,191, 1972, editorial writing; Woodrow Wilson, Panama City (Fla.) News-Herald, 24,430, 1962, public service.

Of this group, five (Boone, Carter, Davis, Harkey and Smith) won for stories and editorials easing black-white tension preceeding and during the struggle for civil rights in the South. Two others (Brown and Strohmeyer) received awards for reports and editorials concerned with

Spanish-speaking groups (Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans respectively). Harrison and Wilson both won for crusades with Harrison campaigning to improve housing for poor persons, particularly blacks, and Wilson trying to clean up local corruption that included bootlegging and a numbers-type racket aimed at blacks. Only one, Cox, covered a non-elite white group - Appalachian residents terrorized by a sniper.

In describing the role of the community press, the ten prize-winners emphasized that they are in much closer physical contact with their readers than representatives of the metropolitan press. Since they live and work in relatively small areas, they are not known just as by-lines but as next-door neighbors. As Strohmeyer of the Bethlehem Globe-Times put it, if you are a small-town editor you get news "when you go to the drug store, you get it in church, you get it when you go to a saloon." When his newspaper took an unpopular stand and called for white police to improve communications with Puerto Rican youth, "my wife would hear about it in church, my kids would get it (opposition) in school, on the streets I'd get it any place I went."[3]

It might be expected that this close proximity would enable the community press to do a better job of covering non-elite groups than the metropolitan press. Examination of the case histories of the Pulitzer-prize winners, however, shows that this is not necessarily true. Because the community press is small and often shaky economically, it appears more difficult for it to take a stand on controversial questions involving non-elite groups than for the stronger metropolitan press.

As the examples of the Pulitzer-Prize winners show, it was both economically and physically perilous for journalists to take unpopular positions in the South during civil rights strife in the 1950's and 1960's. Three, Carter, Harkey and Smith, who fought lawlessness and injustice encountered economic reprisals from groups opposed to fair treatment for blacks. As might be expected, the smaller and weaker their publications, the more crippling the reprisals, which ranged from cancellation of subscriptions to establishment of competing newspapers. In addition, threats were made against their lives.

Carter of the Tabor City Tribune, who won a Pulitzer prize for fighting the Ku Klux Klan, remembered that period as "the roughest two or three years" of his life. "I don't want any bouquets but there was nobody else in Tabor City who spoke out against the Klan," he said, except for one minister. "We never had support. I never had the first advertiser ever come to me and say, 'I'm going to keep on doing business with you even if you keep on writing against the Klan!" Carter's weekly lost about a fourth of its advertising for two to three years and barely managed to survive. "We've got a town with 80 retail businesses to start with all put together, so you can't lose many and stay in business," he emphasized.[4]

Harkey and Smith stood almost alone among Mississippi journalists in their refusals to give in to white supremacy advocates. After Harkey favored the admission of James Meredith, a black, to the University of Mississippi, in two months his Chronicle lost five large advertisers and its circulation dropped from 7,000 to 6,200. Physical threats were equally as intimidating - a bullet through the office door;

a shotgun blast through the window; a cross burned on his lawn. Vigilantes from a white citizens' group went after Harkey's advertisers. "They threatened - they took the papers away from the carriers, knocked the carriers down and threatened the advertisers to stop advertising, so the advertising was down to nothing," Harkey recalled. Even Harkey's staff disagreed with his stand. "The ad manager would get red in the face when he'd read my editorials," Harkey said.[5]

When Smith of the Lexington Advertiser refused to support the organization of a white citizen's council in her county, she soon found out the consequences. The white supremacist group caused her husband to lose his job as administrator of the local hospital. Then her opponents started a rival weekly in Lexington, subsidized by well-to-do supporters, solely to take advertising away from her newspaper and drive her out of the county. An advertising boycott, which continued for 17 years, was organized against her four small weekly papers and the printing plant for her suburban weekly in Jackson was bombed. Racists burned a cross on her lawn and spread vicious rumors and threats. "They tried everything for three years to put me out of business and couldn't do it," Smith said.[6]

Boone of the Tuscaloosa News supported integration at the University of Alabama in defiance of a mob that threatened to lynch a black woman attempting to enroll. His newspaper escaped economic loss only because its closest competitor declined to capitalize on the situation. "The Birmingham paper was our principal competition and those people up there conducted themselves on such a basis that I went up and thanked them after it was over," Boone said.

"They refused to take any advantage whatever of their smaller competitor down here."[7]

Because of its precarious economic situation, the community press often lacks the resources to adequately cover the news - including controversial issues involving non-elite groups. This is illustrated by the case of Brown of the Alice Echo, who won her Pulitzer prize for doggedly following a series of legal inquiries into the affairs of George B. Parr. Known as the "Duke of Duval," Parr controlled a bloc of Mexican-American votes in Duval County, Texas. "The most I ever made was $50 a week," Brown recalled. "...I did foot my bills when I would leave town and go in (adjoining towns) and cover a (court) case...I was so involved it meant enough to me personally to do that job and do it to the finish."[8]

Wilson, publisher of the Panama City News-Herald, pointed out that the paper's crusade against corruption meant worry over added costs. "I guess the biggest thing was, it was very expensive in that they (the investigative reporters) had all kind of overtime," Wilson said. "...when we started out we had no idea of getting so involved and we never would have gotten so involved if we hadn't been sued (for libel by local officials)...." The suit was settled out-of-court (over Wilson's objections) because the paper's owners thought that would be cheaper in the long run than a trial.[9]

Perhaps it is no accident that the only community newspaper to have won two Pulitzer prizes, the Gainesville Sun, is one of 13 Southern newspapers owned by the New York Times, which has given it a cushion against economic pressure. As Harrison, now a vice-

president of the New York Times, explained, "...(In) almost every community we go into we find a feeling that there is an economic superstructure that runs the community. And the philosophy is that I (the superstructure spokesman) want you to go along with what is right for the community, or if you don't economically, I'll break your back. And sometimes they're very blatant about it. I mean, they'll boycott us, and not advertise with us, sue us, and do all kinds of things."[10]

When Harrison led the Sun's campaign for a minimum housing code for Gainesville, he was publisher of the newspaper. Although no boycott was brought, the mayor called Harrison to object. "It became very personal," Harrison said. "And I would see him in a social atmosphere. He was an owner of a bank and realtor and a developer, and he was quite a problem all the time, involved in the community...." Some publishers might have given in at this point, but Harrison, secure in his backing by the New York Times, only replied, "We're determined, and we're going to stay on until we get it."[11]

Cox of the Chambersburg Public Opinion, who covered a crime story (attacks and a kidnapping by a deranged sniper) said that he was extremely careful about what he wrote. While his paper faced little potential economic difficulty from covering the story, Cox feared that his access to news sources would be shut off if he offended the victims. "I purposely shied away from reporting on the life style," he said. "I took pictures and I let the pictures show what they showed. But I did not put into words that the people were quite poor....I didn't do it that way and people appreciated it.

I avoided terms like 'Tobacco Road,' 'poorest people in the world,' 'Appalachia.' The outside reporters used them. I purposely avoided them. I think if I'm going to live in that area and I am, then I'm not going out of my way to make enemies."

As these examples have shown, the community press (with the exception of papers that have superior resources) is in a poor position to "make enemies" by tackling subjects that offend the existing power structure. Since non-elite groups by definition are outside this structure, they are likely to be overlooked. "...I've thought a lot of times that the weekly newspapers where they just report the women's club meetings and the garden clubs and the bridge affairs, don't have any problems (making) a living. But those that really say something...they are putting their future on the line every week...." Carter of the Tabor City Tribune said.[13]

Social and economic pressure on the community press to uphold the status quo often means that controversial subjects are not reported until they explode in violence. Of the ten prize-winners covered in this study, eight (Boone, Brown, Carter, Cox, Davis, Harkey, Smith and Strohmeyer) dealt with situations that had reached the point where it was difficult for the local press to ignore them. Even then, however, all except possibly Cox still were under pressure to play it "safe" and overlook or discount events disrupting community life.

For example, Boone noted that there was a trend throughout the South during the period of civil rights conflict to minimize events at home and focus on other communities' problems. "They

(other newspapers) were printing news on the front pages that occurred in Tuscaloosa and burying it if it occurred in their own hometown," Boone said. "Birmingham did not discover the story it had (about) racial difficulties which finally ended up with the bombing of a church until it reached that point. Birmingham had a story on the front page about some racial difficulties in Macon, Georgia,...and their (local) stuff was on the inside page and the Macon paper had a front page story on what was going on in Birmingham and what was going on in their own town was on the inside."[14]

Davis of the Gainesville Sun wrote his prize-winning editorials urging peaceful school desegregation under deadline pressure after a federal court ordered Alachua County, which includes Gainesville, to integrate its schools within 17 days. The Alachua County desegregation case, along with others, had been pending for years in the federal courts but still the community - and the newspaper - were surprised when the order was handed down and it was essential to take a definite stand. "...you were dealing from a distance to the thing and you were not up on every move, so I don't expect we were as well informed as we should have been on the progress on the suits," Davis said.[15] Consequently a crisis had developed before the paper attempted to calm the community.

Even Brown, who was covering court proceedings, found herself in the midst of personal confrontation. Abuse was heaped on her simply because she reported the downfall of a political machine manipulating Mexican-American voters. "...you get it because what they (the corrupt political forces) are trying to do is cut you

down. ...I was a threat to them because they didn't want this thing emblazoned over the front pages of the state papers." She said, "They would have loved to keep me in their pocket but it really didn't bother me."[16] Her paper, however, gave her little encouragement, paying her $15 a week less than the sports' reporter. This led her to quit the week she won the Pulitzer.

Based on these illustrations, it seems the community press, in general, is not likely to report social conditions involving non-elite groups in advance of a confrontation (or obvious news-making) situation itself. Apart from confrontations, the local press sometimes covers non-elite groups during infrequent crusades focused on specific objectives.

This is seen in the crusades involving Harrison and Wilson. Harrison launched a successful crusade for a minimum housing code when a local builder came to him. "He said that they (his associates) needed the help of the newspaper (in) trying to get the minimum housing codes, which in turn would trigger urban renewal funds. ... you could not get urban renewal funds without a minimum housing code. So I went with (him) for several days... and toured some of the black housing in the city of Gainesville..."I was literally shocked," Harrison said.[17] In a series of editorials he detailed the plight of poverty-stricken tenants.

Wilson's paper began its campaign against corruption when a reporter, acting on a tip, discovered that tickets for "bolita," a type of gambling aimed at the poor, could be purchased openly in Panama City. When investigation disclosed that the "bolita" operators were being protected by law enforcement authorities, the newspaper

continued to cover the story in spite of a libel suit filed against it by the state's attorney. Although the stories led to a shake-up in law enforcement agencies, the crusade made little lasting impact on the city, Wilson said. "It was very, very disheartening the lack of support that we did get....We had one minister who came to our rescue and he got fired."[18]

In both cases, non-elite groups were depicted as victims. Harrison wrote several editorials picturing the housing situation through the eyes of the persons who had no choice except to live in shacks lacking even a water supply. The emphasis, as in many crusades, was in providing something for underprivileged people - not on covering the group itself or the complex array of social, economic and political factors that led to its deprivation. In Wilson's case little attention was paid to the "bolita" players themselves.

But infrequent coverage of non-elite groups does not minimize the importance of the personal dialogue between the community press and its readers. Even though the community press may avoid controversy until a conflict occurs, when this happens community papers can play an heroic role in reducing violence and curbing tension, as in the cases of Boone, Carter, Davis, Harkey, Smith and Strohmeyer. All believed that by giving the facts about the situations confronting their communities they could persuade citizens to uphold the law and promote justice. Since their motives often were suspected, their stands required exceptional bravery. For example, Smith said that she received a telephone call from a man to whom she had once been engaged after he read her account

of a black mental patient fatally shot in the back by a white policeman arresting him on a false charge of suspicion of drunkenness. "...he said, 'Look, what are you trying to do down there? Are you trying to start a riot?' I just read this story ... It just really ran through me that here he could have so little understanding," Smith recalled. And I said, 'Hell, no, I'm not trying to start a riot. I'm trying to stop one. To keep one from happening.' And, I was really furious, you know, that he called me and criticized me for running that story....My philosophy on that is that I don't have the right to withhold the story when the local law officials that are supposed to uphold the law take the law into their own hands and kill somebody, really without provocation. I don't have the right to withhold a story like that from my readers even if I wanted to, which I don't."[19] She saw herself as a beacon of hope to black people because she gave the true facts.

In conclusion, three main points emerge from this study of Pulitzer prize winners: (1) The community press tends to be dependent on a relatively small power structure that has the power to retaliate economically if news coverage offends it; (2) This dependence often forces the community press to ignore subjects involving non-elite groups since these are outside the power structure; (3) Coverage of non-elite groups usually is limited to a confrontation or a crusade focused on a very limited objective.

When a crisis or confrontation takes place, the community press has the capability to challenge elements within the power structure and to force the community to reassess its relationship

to non-elites, as these examples of Pulitzer prize winners show. Yet it must be remembered that these ten community journalists were honored because they were so extraordinary - because they had the courage to be counted at a time when many of their counterparts were quiet. As far as coverage of non-elites goes, it appears from this limited study that the community press only occasionally speaks up with voices of courage.

Notes

[1]Non-elithe groups are defined as those outside the mainstream of American life - blacks, the Spanish-speaking, poor whites.

[2]The interviews were part of a longer project to determine reporting techniques used by Pulitzer-prize winners. Of the 10 interviewees used for this study, eight were individual winners of Pulitzer prizes and two were responsible for Pulitzer prizes given to their publications. Individual winners were named in the reporting and editorial writing catagories while publications were named in the public service catagory.

[3]Interview with Richard Harlow, Bethlehem, Pa., Feb. 20, 1977.

[4]Interview with Maurine Beasley. Gainesville, Fla., June 18, 1977.

[5]Interview with Caroline Barnard Hall (acting for Richard Harlow), New Orleans, La., May 16, 1977.

[6]Interview with Maurine Beasley, College Park, Md., March 16, 1976.

[7]Interview with Maurine Beasley and Richard Harlow, Tuscaloosa, Ala., Jan. 28, 1978.

[8]Interview with Maurine Beasley, Alice, Tex., March 27, 1976.

[9]Interview with Maurine Beasley, Panama City, Fla., May 26, 1977.

[10]Interview with Maurine Beasley, Gainesville, Fla., Dec. 22, 1976.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Interview with Maurine Beasley and students in a reporting class, College Park, Md., Oct. 21, 1977.

[13]Carter interview.

[14]Boone interview.

[15]Interview with Maurine Beasley, Gainesville, Fla., June 18, 1977.

[16]Brown Interview.

[17]Harrison interview.

[18]Wilson interview.

[19]Smith interview.

ABSTRACT

THE COMMUNITY PRESS: OCCASIONAL VOICES OF COURAGE

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ABSTRACT

The authors have attempted to answer the question of how the community press (defined as newspapers with less than 35,000 circulation) covers non-elite groups by drawing on personal interviews with 10 reporters and editors awarded Pulitzer prizes from community newspapers. All 10 received their prizes from 1953 to 1976 for articles dealing in various ways with non-elite groups (those outside the mainstream of the local power structure such as blacks, the Spanish-speaking, poor whites). Through a case history approach to the news coverage of this group of eight men and two women, Beasley and Harlow felt that valid conclusions could be reached regarding the relationship of the community press to non-elite groups.

Five members of the group won for coverage of black-white tension during the civil rights struggle in the South. Two won for material related to Spanish-speaking groups, while two others were leaders of crusades to change conditions affecting poor blacks. Only one wrote about a poor white group.

By letting these journalists tell the stories of their award-winning coverage in their own words, the following conclusions are reached: (1) The community press is likely to be dependent on a small power structure that can retaliate economically if news coverage of non-elites offends it; (2) This dependence often forces the community press to ignore subjects involving non-elites; (3) Coverage of non-elites usually is limited to a confrontation situation or a crusade; (4) When a crisis occurs, the community press can play a vital role in enabling the community to reassess its relationship to non-elites. Yet it is relatively uncommon for the community press to play this role because of unwillingness or inability to challenge the status quo.

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